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SUBJECT: DAS DESHAZO'S MEETING WITH AMBASSADORS ON 2/16/2004

REF: CARACAS 00503 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Charles S. Shapiro for Reasons 1.5(b)
and (d)

Summary:

11. (C) During a February 16 meeting in Caracas, DAS Peter DeShazo told ambassadors from interested countries that the international community needs to make clear its strong and unified support for the democratic process, the OAS and the Carter Center. The Spanish ambassador worried about a CNE collapse if the two opposition directors walk out. The Canadian ambassador observed that Chavez's recent rhetoric sounded like a "bully," more intransigent and more aggressive, and noted that OAS resolution 833 could still be used for additional action. The ambassadors from Mexico and Colombia chafed at the prospect of their governments making additional bilateral statements on the CNE process. While the Mexican ambassador agreed that we need an expression from the international community, he suggested the OAS could effectively carry Mexico's message.

12. (C) The Spanish ambassador reported rumors that the Gov is suppressing news of violence during the opposition demonstration on February 14. The Chilean ambassador observed that military commanders loyal to Chavez locked down troops in their barracks during the march. The Canadian ambassador said he visited the CNE building on February 14 and observed "frightening" people preparing for a confrontation. The Mexican ambassador said the National Guard has an active presence near the CNE building in order to exert pressure on the CNE.

End summary.

Message of Support for OAS and Carter Center;
International Community Urged to Act

13. (C) During a February 16 visit to Caracas, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Peter DeShazo and Ambassador Charles Shapiro met with Spanish Ambassador Manuel Viturro de la Torre, Canadian Ambassador Allan Culham, Chilean Ambassador Pavier Vio, Colombian Ambassador Maria Angela Holguin, Mexican Ambassador Enrique Loaneza, and Argentine Charge d'Affaires Carlos Riva regarding the current situation in Venezuela and the role of the international community in regard to the National Electoral Council (CNE) and the on-going process to verify signatures on petitions seeking a recall referendum on the rule of President Hugo Chavez.

14. (C) DAS DeShazo told the diplomats that the USG is urging countries and any individuals with influence to weigh in on the question of Venezuela's continued movement toward an electoral solution to the on-going political impasse. He said he was pleased that Canadian OAS Permanent Representative Paul Durand is planning to visit Venezuela. (Note: Durand is currently the president of the PAS permanent council). Unfortunately, DAS DeShazo reported, Ambassador Durand will be delayed because of emergency meetings regarding Haiti. DAS DeShazo polled the diplomats on their opinions on what members of the international community could do regarding Venezuela. After discussion, DAS DeShazo said all interested parties in the international community need to make clear their strong and unified support for the OAS and Carter Center. That message should be communicated both publicly and privately, in multi-national groups such as the Friends of Venezuela or the OAS, as well as in bilateral meetings with the Gov. The central message for all is that each government/country supports the democratic process and the involvement of the OAS and the Carter Center.

Spain: Venezuela Must Act

15. (C) Spanish Ambassador Viturro said that the message he

took away from recent briefings from the OAS representative Francisco Jaramillo and Carter Center representative Jennifer McCoy was that public criticism of the CNE could be a disaster. As a result, the ambassador was surprised that the February 13 OAS/Carter Center statement seemed to advise the CNE on internal processes. The OAS and Carter Center, he said, must remember the process is exclusively in the hands of Venezuela, or risk becoming embroiled in angry GoV statements about attempted "colonialism."

16. (C) Viturro noted that Chavez was in the midst of a political campaign, and predicted that he will try to force the hand of the CNE. In answer to a question from the DAS, Viturro said any public criticism brought by the OAS/Carter Center against the GoV and the CNE for failing to verify the signatures would provide "a balloon of oxygen" for the Venezuelan opposition.

17. (C) Viturro noted that the OAS is in some ways at a disadvantage because it makes decisions by consensus and the GoV can block action it does not like. The Carter Center, the ambassador said, can speak more clearly because it is a private NGO and has only its own opinion to pronounce. The Spanish ambassador also noted that the work of local NGO Sumate, which maintains an electronic database with digitized images of every signature gathered, makes any fraud by the GoV very difficult. Canadian Ambassador Culham added that Sumate is impressive, transparent, and run entirely by volunteers.

18. (C) Viturro noted that the CNE's decision is not final and is subject to review by the Venezuelan Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) in legal challenges brought by either the GoV or the opposition. He worries about the international crisis in the CNE board. If the two opposition CNE directors were to walk out, the CNE would collapse and the situation would be very serious. Viturro wondered if the CNE collapses whether the TSJ would step in. Such a situation would affect all electoral processes. Accordingly, he said the OAS and Carter Center need to focus not only on the activities of the CNE, but also on the CNE itself.

Canada: Chavez Talks Like Bully; Resolution 833 Still There

19. (C) Canadian Ambassador Culham expressed surprise at the tone of Chavez's statements during his weekly television and radio show "Hello President" on February 15. Culham observed that Chavez's rhetoric was as tough as he had ever heard him. "He sounded like a bully," said Culham, more intransigent and more aggressive.

110. (C) Culham noted that OAS resolution 833 was still available for reference and could be used for additional action, such as calling for a report from the observers or another visit from OAS SYG Cesar Gaviria. Culham said we are not yet at a stage where nothing can be done. The Canadian government will shortly issue a statement supporting the OAS/Carter Center. (Note that statement issued) Those organizations and their work, said Culham, are all that stand between Venezuela's future and "complete chaos."

Argentina: Court Ruling Would Help

111. (C) Argentine Charge Riva noted that the whole electoral process will likely end up in court before the TSJ. That may be a net benefit. A court ruling, said Riba, may give the people more confidence in the process.

Mexico and Colombia: Isn't the OAS Enough?

112. (C) The ambassadors from Mexico and Colombia both chafed at the prospect of their governments making additional bilateral statements on the CNE process. Mexican Ambassador Loaeza suggested that the OAS could effectively carry Mexico's message. DAS DeShazo pointed out that the OAS was limited and messages from members of the broader international community would be helpful. Loaeza agreed, and said the wider "Inter-American Community," including Western Hemisphere nations and interested countries like Spain and Portugal, would make a good working group. Loaeza said his government's principle worry was to avoid any perception of an intervention by outside countries. Nevertheless, Loaeza agreed that it was clear that we needed some expression from the international community. Any such statement, Loaeza said, must be formulated to show no preference toward either side. Loaeza asked if the U.S. would sponsor a resolution to that effect in the OAS.

113. (C) DAS DeShazo said the U.S. was currently working within the OAS but, in addition, the USG urged every country to speak bilaterally with the GoV to communicate worry and interest regarding the current situation and to express support for the OAS and the Carter Center. The DAS added that we could speak privately about specific issues such as the disqualification of signature sheets, but public statements would be more useful is kept to a general statement of support for the process and OAS/Carter Center involvement.

114. (C) Colombian Ambassador Holguin said her government was particularly sensitive about any communication that could damage the already delicate relationship between the neighboring countries. Therefore, she saw little chance that Colombia would make any movement outside the OAS.

Chile: OAS/Carter Center Must Appear Independent

115. (C) Chilean Ambassador Favio Vio said the perception that the OAS and the Carter Center are operating independently is extremely important. The developments he saw during the week of February 9 were particularly worrisome. The Government of Chile, said Vio, feels OAS SYG Gavia will have to personally re-enter the field. Ambassador Shapiro noted that Gavia may have influence with the Inter-American Community, but the Carter Center has more influence with Chavez.

Opposition March Peaceful But Pressure on CNE Still Evident

116. (C) The Colombian ambassador was thankful the February 14 opposition march was peaceful, and was happy the opposition decided to avoid any confrontation by not marching to the CNE building as originally planned. Spanish Ambassador Viturro said that he was in the Venezuelan resort of Los Roques with a group supporting the opposition, and they reported rumors that the GoV had killed two opposition demonstrators in Caracas on February 14. The rumor, reported Viturro, is that the GoV is suppressing news of the deaths. The point, he said, is although the march was peaceful, rumors still circulate in some opposition circles. Chilean Ambassador Vio said he was impressed at how effectively the military commanders loyal to Chavez had locked down the troops in the barracks during the march.

117. (C) Canadian Ambassador Culham reported that he had personally gone to the zone near the CNE building on the day of the February 14 march, and observed "frightening" people preparing for a confrontation. Ambassador Shapiro noted that directors of the CNE themselves effectively require permission from pro-Chavez activists camped outside the CNE to enter. Mexican Ambassador Loaeza said the National Guard has an active presence near the CNE building in order to exert GoV pressure on the CNE.

118. (U) DAS DeShazo cleared the text of this cable after leaving post.

SHAPIRO

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